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William R. Barr

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rather, we must account for experience *outside of its own terms*. Binary oppositions, ideological schemas, and the like are useless without some explanation of what happens to us when we go to the movies.

The independent American cinema is a worthy object of study for such a criticism precisely because so much is left to the implicit (textually defined) viewer. A critique of the cinema of Bruce Baillie is impossible without a notion of how his films "work." Movies, to use Godard's formula-

tion, are machines. You pay your money and take the effects. You like them or not. But we as viewers are part of the machine, and nowhere more so than in films such as *To Parsifal*. The machine exists *through* us, as well as through other factors—ideology first of all—beyond any immediate perception. But to understand it all, even to begin to understand what happens, we first must know what happens at the most basic levels—at our end of the machine.

WILLIAM R. BARR

BRAKHAGE:

Artistic Development in Two Childbirth Films

"Never trust the artist. Trust the tale," wrote D. H. Lawrence about uncovering significance in narrative fiction. Lawrence was protecting his work from his own remarks that, applied insensitively or maliciously, would distort meaning or even replace the texts themselves. His advice holds true as well for avant-garde film, especially when it seeks to reveal the workings of an artistic consciousness; with its relatively closely knit practitioners and small (but growing) number of followers, experimental film is dependent upon an oral tradition of communication and discussion. Stan Brakhage shares Lawrence's view of the autonomy of the individual work of art and the novelist's distrust of the artist as critic, declining any exceptional position he might otherwise claim by virtue of his acts of creation: " 'Even when I lecture at showing of past Brakhage films I emphasize the fact that I am not artist except when involved in the creative process AND that I speak as viewer of my own . . . —I speak . . . as viewer of *The Work* (NOT of . . . but *By-Way-of-Art*), and I speak specifically to the

point of What has been revealed to me AND, by way of describing the work-process, what I, as artist-viewer, understand of Revelation.' "11 Granting the authority of the autonomous work of art, one can yet bring forth extra-artistic information which clarifies both the intention and the "work-process" behind and within the work; although one may not finally believe the teller, one must listen carefully to him.

Understanding the context in which Brakhage operates is particularly important because of the extensive use he makes of his family in his films. For example, "Open Field," one of the *Sexual Meditations*, might appear to be simply a parody of the stereotyped experimental film which shows a young, nude girl running through a field in slow motion. But the information that the girl is Brakhage's daughter entering adolescence and that the film is in part the father's attempt to come to terms with her emerging sexuality and his own feelings towards her leads to a less sterile interpretation. "Open Fields" becomes, through its depiction of the psychological processes that

make the film-maker human, a universalized and even mythic dramatization of the powers of time.

Context plays a more complex role, however, in the comprehension of Brakhage's first two child-birth films, *Window Water Baby Moving* (1959) and *Thigh Line Lyre Triangular* (1961), which David Curtis considers to be among Brakhage's "most widely appreciated works."² The juxtaposition of remarks made by Brakhage and his wife about the genesis of *Window Water*, depicting the birth of their first child, validates Brakhage's awareness of the limitations which his intensely personal, self-directed artistic vision confer upon him. Jane Brakhage saw the decision to film the birth at home rather than in a hospital as extrinsic to the couple, dictated rather by nervous hospital administrators.³ Stan, on the other hand, believed the choice to have been made within the family. More significantly, Jane emphasized her share in the conception and creation of *Window Water*. Her husband, though admitting her to be a consistent "inspiration," asserted with equal emphasis that Jane was completely absorbed in the dynamics of childbirth and that the finished film, which includes shots made by Jane of the relieved father, was solely his work.⁴ Jane Brakhage's statements are invariably the more convincing because they reflect the totality of the environment; Brakhage's, by contrast, limit the context of the film to himself and formal or technical concerns. Given such illustrations of the fallibility of the critical perceptions of even a great artist, one is entitled to wonder whether Brakhage's widely quoted remarks about "closed-eye vision," which he saw as so important to the second birth film and which critics have since assumed to define the significance of the work, are not also in some measure reductive in terms of the finished artifact.⁵ One purpose of this paper is, therefore, corrective; but in its more important aspect it tries to reach beyond the merely negative to arrive at a fuller understanding of Brakhage's artistic achievement as it is revealed through the relationship between the two birth films.

"Crisis" is an integral part of Brakhage's work and his perceptions as theoretician and human being. At times what qualifies as critical seems

trivial, but in general biological milestones fascinate him. Death in particular haunts him; in *Anticipation of the Night* (1958), which includes an abstract birth sequence, a suicide jarringly concludes what is otherwise an unmistakably joyous hymn to life. The inconsistent closure demonstrates the dominance of the idea in one way, but Brakhage's retrospective explanation of the technique to be employed is even more startling: the death by hanging was to be his own, the film-maker shooting footage until he strangled.⁶ The question of death is carried over in *Window Water*, too, but there it emerges as background rather than as substantive filmic material. Brakhage wondered, in a fantasy that inverts the usual parental vicariousness, whether the newborn child—especially if it were a boy, would "take my place in life and leave me free to die."⁷ Such an anxiety may account for the result that both techniques and selection of material to be filmed make the audience and the film-maker more distant from the event of parturition, which is depicted in awe-inspiring, purely physiological and "realistic" images.⁸ P. Adams Sitney states, for example, that "throughout the film Brakhage uses black and white leader to affirm the screen and the cinematic illusion . . . for relieving the dramatic tension built up as the moment of birth approaches."⁹ Other techniques, though, are explicitly and almost sentimentally theatrical, more characteristic of Hollywood films than of experimental cinema. The film's early sequences, showing a laughing, pregnant Jane in a bathtub, prepare in a conventional way the antithesis between idyllic bliss and the physiological pressures and visceral knowledge of parturition. Likewise, the intercutting of these images with the more anguished later shots accentuates the mythic journey from innocence to experience in the naively romantic terms of the commercial flashback. If, as Sitney argues, *Window Water* conforms to the definition of lyrical films—"the lyrical film postulates the film-maker behind the camera as the first-person protagonist of the film" (*VF*, p. 180)—then one corollary is that the finished film primarily reflects the artist's consciousness, drawing attention to his craftsmanship. Such, clearly, is the case with the use of

black or white leader and especially with the intercutting of early and late images, where memory's recall destroys chronometric and historical time. But the camera's emergence as a quasi-character which can unblinkingly record the visual details of labor and birth (unlike the humans who need relief from the naked event) implies a central ambiguity about the film-maker's position in this film. Jane Brakhage's remarks about filming *Window Water* are useful here, not least because her husband supports them: " 'He calls the hospital and gets the nurse who says she'll be right there. . . . Stan starts worrying. I continue roaring and panting. Stan stops filming he's so upset. He gets nervous. He tells me to relax and pant. He needs to relax; I'm doing fine. I tell him how much I love him and ask him if he's got my face when I'm roaring and this sets him off again and reassures him, and he clickety-clackety-buzzes while I roar and pant.' " ¹⁰ Not only has the agent in the film reminded the film-maker to do his job, but the film-maker, nearly paralyzed by his confrontation with raw life, finds refuge from the phenomenal world and its attendant, primal anxieties by retreating behind the camera. It would appear, then, that *Window Water* is at least as much a traditional dramatic or documentary enterprise as a lyrical film for two reasons. First, the film-maker is not the protagonist, since the camera ultimately replaces and obliterates rather than affirms his consciousness. Second, the film is made powerful less by the film-maker's craft than by the sheer presence of Jane Brakhage and the unavoidable fact of the experience which she undergoes. *Window Water* is, as a result, a generic hybrid; it includes two major foci without developing any relationship between them.

Like *Window Water*, the second birth film (of the couple's third child) is silent and in color. Otherwise, *Thigh Line* is very different from its predecessor. Its setting is a hospital rather than a home. In contrast to *Window Water's* 17 minutes, *Thigh Line* is only five minutes long; and the later film lacks the urgency and intensity of the earlier one. *Thigh Line Lyre Triangular* underscores the cinematic illusion through anamorphic shots of Jane Brakhage in labor and of

the doctor and nurse in attendance, through prominent use of leader, through intercutting of birds and animals with hospital sequences, and especially through painting directly on the film. "Realistic" sequences are, consequently, rarely in evidence. Sitney, in somewhat disapproving tones, argues that "although we do not see him in this film there is no doubt that we are looking at the birth through the eyes of the artist, whose eccentric vision is ecstatic to the point of being possessed" (VF, p. 191). It is true that *Thigh Line*, more than *Window Water*, attempts to reproduce in visual terms the consciousness of its maker, the later film does not support a charge of either eccentricity or possession, both of which imply a greater or lesser loss of control. More important, it does not encourage a sense of discontinuity between the film-maker and the material with which he works. Instead, *Thigh Line* achieves a profound fusion of the two.

One method of attaining this fusion is through the introduction of birds and animals as natural symbols. Brakhage explained that these "were easily represented by taking material only out of *Anticipation of the Night*." ¹¹ While their connection with vitality is apparent, equally significant is their having had a previous existence in another film. The imagistic reiteration implicitly acknowledges creative and historical continuity as analogous and interrelated; the symbolic potential further refines the former component to include organic development. But the painting on film is of greater centrality in linking the artist with his material. In *Metaphors on Vision*, Brakhage stated that "only at a crisis do I see both the scene as I've been trained to see it (that is, with Renaissance perspective, three-dimensional logic—colors as we've been trained to call a color a color, and so forth) and patterns that move straight out from the inside of the mind through the optic nerves. In other words, in intensive crisis I can see from the inside out and the outside in. . . . I wanted a childbirth film that expressed all my seeing at such a time." ¹² In general terms, Brakhage's famous statement articulates any artist's ability to see in both conventional and idiosyncratic ways, and by extension to construct a work which is generically

categorizable (and therefore accessible to the audience) but also made unique by an individual's signature. In this sense, the theoretical explanation applies as well to *Window Water* as to *Thigh Line*. But the signature in the latter film lies in its expression of the "patterns that move straight out from the inside of the mind through the optic nerves"—Brakhage's "closed-eye vision" that results from the interplay of light and eye when the eye is closed, from external pressure on the eyeball, and even from the electrical impulses along the optic nerves themselves. In this lies the peculiar problem of the passage quoted. No one can underestimate the importance of the contribution of "closed-eye vision," but by the same token the device should not be taken out of context, isolated, and proffered as absolute truth. While "closed-eye vision" enormously expands the optical possibilities of film, unintegrated emphasis upon it reduces vision to mechanical operations. Devoid of any organic connection with the film, the technique is merely a tour de force; and Brakhage's reference to "all my seeing," when it is taken to be limited to the radical form of presentation in its formalistic aspects, leads only to an unfair charge of solipsism.

It is possible to suggest that the film has a different, less exclusive significance, based on the implications of "all my seeing." Brakhage has spoken of how his work changed after he married Jane Collum:

"I would say I grew very quickly as a film artist once I got rid of drama as prime source of inspiration. I began to feel all history, all life, all that I would have as material with which to work, would have to come from the inside of me out rather than as some form imposed from the outside in. I had the concept of everything radiating out of me, and that the more personal and egocentric I would become, the deeper I would reach and the more I would touch those universal concerns which would involve all man. What seems to have happened since marriage is that I no longer sense ego as the greatest source for what can touch on the universal. I now feel that there is some other concrete center where love from one person to another meets; and that the more total view arises from there. . . . It's in the action of moving out that the great concerns can be struck off continually. . . . Where I take action strongest and most immediately is in reaching

through the power of all that love towards my wife, (and she towards me) and somewhere those actions meet and cross, and bring forth children and films and inspire concerns with plants and rocks and all sights seen, a new center, composed of action, is made'" (quoted in VF p. 185).

Brakhage seems to have underestimated the tenacity of his premarriage views, since they are evident in *Window Water's* concern for conventional drama and the egocentricity of his commentary. But between *Window Water* and *Thigh Line*, the major shift in perspective began, for the later film is clearly representative of his more developed vision. Its use of painting on film is a pure cinematic symbol for the movement from drama to other modes of organization and from a Whitmanesque egocentricity ("I am vast, I contain multitudes") to a more balanced sensibility. Optically, the painting mediates between the objects filmed and the film-maker himself. This mediation suggests, along with the emphatically anamorphic shots of the objects, a change of focus from far to middle distance—or from representation of objects either as themselves or as the artist's perceptions to a concern for the interaction between the other and the self, an interaction only vaguely implied by the dual focus of *Window Water*. Metaphorically, the painting becomes the triangulated representation of "some other concrete center where love from one person to another meets, . . . [the] somewhere where those actions meet and cross, and bring forth children and films." Where *Window Water* tries to emphasize the artist and to imply that the distance and patterning of the aesthetic product are superior to the turmoil of biological creativity even while it reveals the latter's irresistible force, that lopsided discontinuity disappears in *Thigh Line*. The second childbirth film is a layered, integrated affirmation of all creativity, and its visual symbolism evokes the metaphysical forces that have involved two people in two different but related collaborative efforts.

NOTES

1. "Respond Dance," in P. Adams Sitney, ed., *Film Culture Reader* (New York: Praeger, 1970), pp. 239-40.
2. *Experimental Cinema* (New York: Universe Books, 1971), p. 132. "Song V," a third childbirth film, cannot be divorced

from the aesthetic context of the complete *Songs* and is therefore omitted from this discussion.

3. "The Birth Film," in *FCR*, p. 231.

4. "Interview with Stan Brakhage," *FCR*, pp. 208-10.

5. See, for example, Sheldon Renan, *An Introduction to the American Underground Film* (New York: Dutton Paperbacks, 1967), p. 122; and Sitney, *Visionary Film* (New York: Oxford U. P., 1974), p. 191.

6. "Interview with Stan Brakhage," pp. 202-03.

7. *Ibid.*, pp. 208-09.

8. Just so, Carol Emshwiller pointed out to me that the beauty

of "The Act of Seeing with One's Own Eyes" ("Autopsy"), the third segment of *The Pittsburgh Trilogy*, derives from the patterned rituals of dissection opposed to the nearly intolerable vision of humans reduced to meat.

9. Sitney, *Visionary Film*, p. 189. Subsequent references to this edition will be included in the text.

10. "The Birth Film," pp. 232-33.

11. "Interview with Stan Brakhage," p. 225.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 225. See also *Film-Makers' Cooperative Catalogue No. 6* (New York: Harry Gantt, 1975), p. 27.

STEVEN KOVACS

Kuleshov's Aesthetics

Any discussion of experimentation in Soviet film in the twenties begins with the "Kuleshov effect" to illustrate the power of editing. It was an illusion achieved through time which demonstrated that the succession of one shot by another would alter the apparent meaning of the component shots. The experiment had been conducted with the shot of the actor Mozhukhin's expressionless face followed by shots of a bowl of soup, a child in a coffin, and a sunny landscape. The audience applauded the subtle variations of his face to show alternately hunger, pity, and joy. It was the "Kuleshov effect" that triggered Eisenstein's and Pudovkin's work with montage. While the experiment has become a familiar milestone in the development of the language of cinema, its author has remained a near unknown.

Yet that oblivion is greatly undeserved. Lev Kuleshov was not simply the originator of experiments with montage, but also a director in his own right and a teacher of film who had taught half of all Soviet directors by the time of his death in 1970. It was in his workshop that Eisenstein learned the trade of film-making in three months of diligent work, proving only too well his own maxim that "Anyone can become a film director, but one man needs to study for two years, another for two hundred years." His

students of the twenties, including Pudovkin, recognized him as the most influential practical theoretician of cinema when they wrote in the foreword to his book *Art of the Cinema*, "We make films—Kuleshov made cinematography."

Kuleshov was the only major figure of the young Soviet cinema who had worked in the industry before the revolution. In 1916 he became a set designer for Yevgeni Bauer, one of the progressive directors of Czarist Russia. The following year he directed his first feature which deliberately used the principles of montage. Once the revolution came, he was sent to the Eastern Front to shoot documentary footage of the battles with the interventionist armies, which he combined with acted sequences upon his return to make the first film of its kind in the Soviet Union. He began teaching at the State Film School and, as soon as conditions allowed, he returned to making films. As for most of his colleagues, so for him the twenties proved to be the most fruitful period both in the development of his theory and in its practical implementation. That creative period was succeeded by the beleaguered thirties, when Kuleshov struggled simultaneously with the new demands of sound film and with intensified political criticism. He made a few artless films in the early forties, but